

***On Friday, June 14, 2013 the annual Service of Prayer for Christian Unity at Pentecost was hosted by Our Lady Queen of Angels Roman Catholic Church in Newport Beach. Over 500 people attended the service. Everyone agreed that it was truly a beautiful, Spirit-filled evening, celebrating the unity between Roman Catholic, Oriental Orthodox and Orthodox Christian churches that already exists and praying for the descent of the Holy Spirit to guide us ever more deeply towards one another.***

***Below is the sermon preached on Friday, June 14, 2013 by Father Al Baca, the pastor of St. Cecilia's Roman Catholic Church in Tustin and Vicar for Ecumenical Affairs:***

This past year, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI announced a Year of Faith for the Catholic world with the intention of renewing personal faith and giving new power and a new freshness to Christian life. Certainly, it has been an opportunity to take



stock, to measure ourselves up against the Gospel, to open ourselves more to the Holy Spirit. In many ways it has served to remind us how important it is to not take faith for granted. With the election of Pope Francis, I think this has become even more evident as he almost daily calls on the Church to be more evangelical, more faithful, and equipped to stretch herself to the boundaries of society where there are many people today who

are lost and can no longer recognize God among us. It is this outward stretch that rejuvenates and refreshes the Church. However, before the engagement with society can happen and be successful, there has to be faith. Is this not the way of the saints? They recognize and see the needs, the failures, the dangers and they bring their faith to bear upon the great questions of our day and they act!

Invited to the opening Mass for the Year of Faith were religious leaders, not the least of whom was the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I. His Holiness stated, "It is fitting that this occasion also marks for your Church the formal inauguration of the "Year of Faith" as it is faith that provides a visible sign of the journey we have traveled together along the path of reconciliation and visible unity."

Tonight I would like to give attention to the ecclesial quest of restoration of full and visible unity among the Christian Churches and communities: the quest for Christian unity for Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote in his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* about striving for unity between our churches: "Christians cannot underestimate the burden of long-standing misgivings inherited from the past, and of mutual misunderstandings and prejudices. Complacency, indifference and insufficient knowledge of one another often make this situation worse. Consequently, the commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer, which will also lead to the necessary purification of past memories. With the grace of the



Holy Spirit, the Lord's disciples, inspired by love, by the power of truth and by a sincere desire for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, are called to re-examine together their painful past and the hurt which that past regrettably continues to provoke even today. What is needed is a calm, clear-sighted and truthful vision of things, a vision enlivened by divine mercy and capable of freeing people's minds and inspiring in everyone a renewed willingness, precisely with a view to proclaiming the Gospel to the men and women of every people and nation."

This celebration of Pentecost tonight is not a gathering of interested and polite parties, done once a year for the sake of inter-Church courtesy. This celebration liturgically marks what in daily life we are achieving: unity as brothers and sisters around the Lamb of God, united in the Holy Spirit and by His grace being brought closer and closer to that full unity which is the will of the Father. All of us priests here tonight know this is true. Over the years all of us priests, Orthodox, Catholic, and Oriental Orthodox have allowed the Holy Spirit to break down any walls that divided us.

Once those walls had fallen there was no other course or path for us. Love has deepened as we have recognized in each other's faces another brother of the Lord. In some small way we begin to anticipate what our Churches yearn for and pray for.

The work that is done here tonight, which has been spearheaded in no small way by Irma Contreras, is a reflection of the high degree of communion that already exists and grows among us all. This evening service brings together all God's people in a prayer of yearning for a vision that we can almost touch. By continuing to develop our friendship in Christ we lay the ground work for the theological work done by the leadership of our Churches.

As Blessed John Paul II noted, as we come to know each other more and more there is a "healing of memories" that naturally happens. We speak about the past. We find common ground and a way to express regret and sorrow about past events, intemperate words, and sin. We also come to a place where we suffer for each other. The words of St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (*1 Corinthians 12:26*) ring true, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." How can our hearts not ache when we see so many who suffer for the Faith in the ancient Churches of the East? In these last years, believers have suffered from economic hardship, unjust imposed restrictions on education, travel, work and life in general. And so many have given the ultimate witness for Jesus Christ. When churches are desecrated and destroyed how can we

not feel deep sadness as if the same had happened to our own sacred places?

All too often we know that our churches are frequently destroyed and our priests and people martyred for their Christian faith. Once again, that we choose to commemorate and pray for tonight those who have given the ultimate witness is a testimony to the threading of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood that has happened among us. We have learned how to suffer willingly with each other.

The path to unity is too important and for this reason we confide it to the wisdom and protection of the Holy Spirit. Sent to embolden the Apostles, the fire of the Holy Spirit could not be contained. What rested on their heads in the upper room took root in their hearts and changed them forever. The Lord makes all things new and opens doors where men and women see only dead-ends. This work is not about creating something new but recovering what has already been revealed and given. And for this reason we approach ecumenism with confidence and care. Whatever the great questions and the burdens of the past or present we step forward securely knowing that God wills our reconciliation and unity. We dare to over and over again place this work before God, like the man of the parable who continues to knock at the house of his neighbor even though the night is late and the hour seemingly inconvenient. No, we are convinced by God and by the Church that the decision for Church unity is irrevocable, "hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (*Ephesians 4:5*).

AMEN!

## *A Prayer for Christian Unity at Pentecost*

Almighty and eternal God, the King of the ages and Lord of lords, You are beyond comprehension, yet You poured forth Your Holy Spirit into our hearts that we might dare to call upon You as our Father. You ordained that the Paschal mystery of Your Son be brought to completion by the sending of Your Spirit on Pentecost. As You gathered together into one faith those people from many nations and divided by many languages on the day of Pentecost, so we beg You now: in Your mercy, gather the people of Your Church together by the power of Your Holy Spirit, keeping us devoted to serving You and seeking that unity which Your Son commanded His disciples to have.

For You are the one, true and living God and to You do we give glory, together with Your crucified and risen Son our Lord Jesus Christ and Your holy, good and life-creating Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.

**AMEN!**